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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on educational services for blind and visually impaired children in Canada with emphasis on Ontario from the point of view of an administrator of a large rehabilitation agency. The existence is noted of five schools for the blind in Canada serving primarily multihandicapped populations. Effects of Ontario Bill 82 (1985) have included routine integration of blind and visually impaired children in the mainstream of the education system. However, problems arising from integration include difficulty obtaining services for the low incidence disability of blindness; provision of specialized equipment especially in the home; availability of texbooks, etc., in braille, tape or large print; an unmet need for orientation and mobility instruction; and provision of life skills training. Results of a survey of parents of blind children identifying needs resulted in 21 areas judged as critical. Recommended are a central Ontario diagnostic center and efforts to bring together the various stakeholders including rehabilitation services. (DB)

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Keynote Address

The View From Here

BY
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This paper was presented at the Council for Exceptional Children International Conference, Toronto Canada, April 26, 1990.

This paper will focus on the situation within education for blind and visually impaired children in Canada with particular emphasis on Ontario. The author is not an educator, but rather an administrator of a large rehabilitation agency, The Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB), regularly called upon to provide services to school aged children. Thus it is a view from the outside, an overview of problems as seen from a particular perspective.

The CNIB is a Canada-wide non-profit agency, established in 1918 to serve the war blinded. It has become the main provider of rehabilitation services to the blind, visually impaired, and deaf-blind persons of all ages. Its core services are orientation and mobility, rehabilitation, counselling and referral, employment and vocational, technical aids and library services.

The education of young people is the responsibility of the entire community. All of society has a stake in the process and outcome. The formation of educated citizens able to be independent, productive members of society is surely our goal. This goal is no different when we discuss special needs children. Indeed, we need to focus more attention and energy on this group to enable the goal of independence to be maximized.

In Canada, the education is a provincial responsibility. The Federal government participates in tax sharing with the Provincial Governments, but has no direct control of its direction. Therefore, in Canada, there are ten jurisdictions, each establishing their own educational directions. There is some cooperation and shared programs, but these are exceptions.

Across Canada, there are five schools for the blind remaining: W. Ross Macdonald School in Ontario, Sir Fredrick Fraser in Nova Scotia serving the Atlantic Provinces and three in the Province of Quebec, Montreal Association for the Blind, Ecole Jacques Ouellet and Ecole Charlesbourg. These schools now serve a growing multi-handicapped population; they also act as the key resource expertise to their education system.

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In Ontario, since the passing of Bill 82 in 1985, integration of blind and visually impaired children in the mainstream of the education system is the norm. School boards no longer have the right to refuse a child due to a disability. They are to work with the parents to provide the appropriate educational setting for the child. Attendance at the School for the Blind is still an option in Ontario, an option unfortunately no longer available in all provinces.

The multi-disciplined resource team at the W. Ross Macdonald School is usually called upon to visit the local area where a new child is identified and to assess the child's needs. An educational plan is structures and given to eh Special Education Director in the area. However, it is up to the school board to provide the services recommended. There is no "advocate" for the child to ensure the best service is provided.

We all know that blindness is a low incidence disability. School boards respond to numbers and parental pressure. Parents of a blind child often feel alone and unable to obtain all the services required.

Under Bill 82, if a child needs braille, a specialist teacher for the blind must be provided. Where this happens, the teacher usually provides itinerant teaching as well to visually impaired kids. However, in areas where there are only visually impaired kids, there is no provision to provide for a specialist teacher. Thus there is disparity in the services provided.

The provision of specialized equipment is a further problem. While a child may have computer equipment at school, what about home? How does a child reinforce learning if equipment is not available after school and on holidays? In Ontario, the government's Assistive Devices Program (ADP) will pay 75% of appropriate, approved equipment. The parent still has to pay the 25%. Who, however, assists the parent to acquire skills to help the child? As a result, not all children have equal access to the powerful learning available through computers and assistive devices.

The availability of textbooks and reference materials in braille, tape or large print in a timely manner is also of concern. How can children keep up with their peers if they have limited access to the information? The province contracts through W. Ross Macdonald School to make the necessary texts available. The CNIB is sub-contracted to use its volunteer and staff resources to produce the braille and tape. The scramble to produce materials within the required time remains a clear frustration point. What about quick access to support materials? Is it equality in access to information? It does not appear so.

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Orientation and mobility needs are critical. Few school boards have O&M instructors on staff. While teachers in Ontario have had basic O&M training for indoor travel, two issues remain:

(1) O&M is to be provided and paid for by school boards at grade seven. What happens to children before grade seven? Who is responsible? Parents desire early O&M training for their child. Where can it be found?

(2) Where are the O&M specialists? School Boards usually turn to the CNIB O&M staff, but are loathe to pay. Does the agency provide it anyway? If so, who ultimately pays? This is a real scenario in Ontario where O&M specialists have long waiting lists of adults. Does the agency provide O&M before grade seven? This tension causes frustration for the parents, the teacher and the agency.

In Canada, O&M specialists are agency trained by CNIB unless the student has studied in the USA< When these O&M professionals work for CNIB, their certification is recognized and liability is the responsibility of the agency. What happens when they are employed elsewhere?

There is a perpetual shortage of O&M personnel as in other countries. With a high turnover rate, there is a need for continual training programs. To date, attempts to have a Canadian college establish such a program on a continuous basis have failed.

Life skills training is a further critical area. Who teaches the basic skills of daily living? With blind and visually impaired children often the only child in school with such a disability, how are socialization skills acquired? Very often they do not know another child with a similar disability with whom to compare notes or to befriend. Children learn so much from each other, including the skills of coping. Integration must be more than just being there; who assists the child to connect with others?

Who is concerned with after school jobs or summer employment for the student? The blind and visually impaired child also needs these experiences to gain experience and self confidence to face the future worlds of employment.

Recreation. Where in an integrated setting can they participate in team sports? Who teaches them techniques to be able to be "one of the gang?"

Two years ago, CNIB sponsored an 18 month project to ascertain what services CNIB should provide to school aged children and to put in place standard procedures. In a

survey of parents asking what subjects or issues were important to be available to their blind child, they listed the following as critical:

*vision/low vision
*concept development
*academic skills
*communication skills
*sensory/motor skills
*daily living skills
*orientation and mobility
*social/emotional skills/self esteem
*career/vocational education
*preschool programming/early intervention
*summer recreation programming
*technical devices
*French services
*local transcription services
*the need for more teachers of the blind
*multi-handicapped services
*public education/awareness
*advocacy
*resource and information centers
*sex education
*music programs

If indeed the above is critical, what part is the responsibility of the education system?

The question of who pays permeates everything. Regardless of who should provide it, there must be government recognition of the values of said services and money provided to obtain services. In the area of blindness, how do you convince school boards and special education directors to spend?

Where do the parents fit into all of this? From diagnosis, the parent begins an educational process in order to make choices. In some areas, services are very supportive, in others, they are non existent. Parents must learn early to be advocates, to fight for necessary services. Who supports the parent?

Parent groups are of utmost importance. However, these groups are not always in place. In Ontario, VIEWS, the provincial parents group, is growing and is attempting to get all parents involved. It is rapidly growing in influence with the government. Never-

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theless, in a large province where pockets of population are often distant from one another, maintaining parent groups can be difficult.

In Ontario, there is a need for a central diagnostic center for children where parents, educators and other professional involved can work together to maximize services to the child. Presently, there is no coordination, no one assigned to be the case coordinator to broker services required. If in place, problems of transition of services would diminish, i.e., infant development to pre-school to school to work force.

There have been few incentives to bring all the players together. Turf is a problem as is the scramble for limited dollars. Who will take the initiative to get it going? I believe the parent group VIEWS may be the best to pull the stakeholders together to design the system needed and then press government to obtain it. Parents have more impact on government than any professional.

CNIB, as a resource outside of the school system, is called upon to offer the following services to name a few:

a) Parent counselling and support
b) Infant development
c) Orientation and mobility
d) Rehabilitation teaching
e) Technical aids advice
f) Assistance in finding funding
g) Vision rehabilitation
h) Library
i) Employment and career counselling
j) Recreation
k) Toy lending

This presents a clear dilemma for the agency. There is no funding specific for this work; staff are not necessarily trained to work with children; the agency does not want to see the child suffer and yet does not want to let the system off the hook; there is a lack of sufficient staff to cope; resentment from the other professionals within the school system is common.

The agency gets caught in the middle by trying to be all things to all people, succeeds at none of them. CNIB children's workers divide their time between a child and an adult case load. Distances preclude regular contact with any one child. Turnover of staff means continual training costs and interrupted services. In a sense, CNIB is set up to

fail. There are no clear guidelines agreed to by all the players in which to operate. Expectations cannot be met and frustration builds in parents, educators, and agency staff. Perhaps the agency should withdraw form all services to children and force the community to establish them.

Having said all the above, Ontario has the elements of a good system. Through its teacher training program at the University of Western Ontario, there are well trained teachers in the field, skilled in braille and technology. The resources of W. Ross Macdonald School are available to advise school boards. Parents are organized in a well recognized and respected group. CNIB is available with resources. What is lacking is a will to put it all together to challenge government to put in place the very best system.

I believe it can happen. The ingredients are there. The winners will be the child, the parents and the community.

May I conclude with a statement by the Maine Early Intervention Consortium (1981) concerning the need for a Comprehensive Care Services Model:

"We can no longer afford the luxury of independent Parallel systems which serve the same children. Governments and agencies must have a plan for using limited funds more efficiently to develop a single focus system whose allegiance is to the child and to the family."

Showcase Speaker Gary Magarrell, Executive Director, Ontario Division, Canadian National Institute for the Blind.